

VZCZCXRO4522

PP RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHBK #2808/01 2610817

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

P 170817Z SEP 08

FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4364

INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6337

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9029

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4895

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1037

RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2415

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 5641

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002808

SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: MEDIATOR HAS GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS, AND TRIES TO KEEP TALKS ALIVE

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 00141 (SEARCHING FOR WAYS AHEAD)

1B. CHIANG MAI 00120 (IMPLEMENTATION STALLED)

1C. BANGKOK 01210 (RTG TALKS WITH INSURGENTS STALLED)

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Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

Summary and comment:

11. (S) Michael Vatikiotis from the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) provided the Ambassador and DCM an update on September 11 on the status of the secret peace process between the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and southern Thai insurgents. While upbeat about the enthusiasm of many of the process participants, Vatikiotis lamented the toll the political turmoil in Bangkok was taking on the talks: there was no political leadership in Bangkok on the issue, and Army Commander Anupong Paochinda had declined to fill the vacuum. Previously agreed-upon confidence building measure were languishing, and the insurgents were questioning the government's ability to follow through on commitments, he assessed. On the positive side, Vatikiotis told us that opposition MPs have now been brought into the process and that he was trying to maneuver around the political vacuum by establishing a second track of talks designed to broaden the dialogue by involving a wider group of stakeholders. The political, legal, and constitutional hurdles to progress towards a peace deal, however, remain daunting.

12. (S) Comment: We are not sure whether HDC's efforts are bringing the parties engaged in the conflict closer to a peace deal, or whether HDC's efforts are merely helping disparate insurgent groups consolidate and become unified while the RTG continues to "manage" the problem. For a negotiated settlement to be successful, the insurgents clearly need to be unified under some form of political leadership. The nature of this insurgency, however, is elusive. Our understanding of which groups are involved, their degree of unity, command and control, and leadership structures all are vague. Although we believe any movement towards reconciliation and settlement in this conflict is positive, the overarching issue at stake, ie., the nature of Thai identity and whether that identity includes Malay

Muslims, is not an issue either the RTG or the multiple insurgent groups, are currently ready to resolve. We agree with Vatikiotis that the lingering political crisis in Bangkok means nobody in the RTG is focused on the south. End comment.

¶3. (S) Michael Vatikiotis (protect) from the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC) provided the Ambassador and DCM with an update September 11 on the secret dialogue between the Thai government and southern Thai insurgents. Vatikiotis told us they had completed three rounds of talks - all in Indonesia. One round was held in Bali and two in Jakarta. He judged that Indonesia was a good place for these meetings because it provided neutral ground where the participants did not feel pressured. He said he notified the Indonesian Foreign Ministry before each round of talks; the Indonesians had been welcoming and even helpful. As an example, he said one of the "movement" leaders coming to Indonesia from Syria for a round of talks was traveling on only a "hand written" Thai passport. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry facilitated his entry after Singapore authorities initially refused transit. (Note: Throughout the discussion Vatikiotis referred to the insurgent groups participating in the peace effort as "the movement." End note.)

Willing participants, but little political will

¶4. (S) Vatikiotis told us there was both good news and bad news. The good news was that the process was still alive in the face of political turmoil in Bangkok; the two sides are establishing trust and are committed to the peace process. The bad news, he said, was that the political backing in Bangkok for the process had withered. Although former

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interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont was still interested in the talks, he now provided only moral support, since he was reluctant to assume any formal role after having returned to the Privy Council. Unfortunately, Vatikiotis told us, Army Commander Anupong Paochinda had decided the political process surrounding the dialogue was inherently too difficult in the absence of political leadership, and that it was not the army's job to decide the fate of the peace process. According to Vatikiotis, Anupong believes that the fate of the peace process is a decision for the political leadership. Vatikiotis characterized the current leadership of the government committee responsible for moving the peace process forward as less than helpful. He said National Security Council Secretary General Siripong Boonpat was a major stumbling block; Siripong had a simplistic view of the situation and characterized all the militants as terrorists. He wanted nothing to do with the talks and did not fund government efforts to facilitate them.

¶5. (S) The political vacuum in Bangkok also was taking a toll on the talks, according to Vatikiotis. The lack of movement on confidence building measures has caused the movement to begin questioning the government's credibility. He said movement leaders on the ground had agreed to a halt in operations in Yala for one month if the RTG agreed to release some prisoners, but nothing had happened (reftel C). General Anupong had refused to give the green light for the prisoner release because he had no political guidance on the issue, the same obstacle to a proposed "peace zone" in the South (reftel A). Now, Vatikiotis lamented, no one is in charge. "We are back to where we were a year ago."

Virasakdi brings the opposition onboard

¶6. (S) On a positive note, Vatikiotis said the peace process was not as secret as it had once been, and that opposition Democrat Party MPs were now briefed on the dialogue. Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul had reached out to Vatikiotis, worried that the Democrat Party might try

to reinvent the wheel. Virasakdi requested Vatikiotis brief the leader of the opposition, Abhisit Vejjajiva, to ensure there was a unified approach to the situation and everyone was "on the same page." Vatikiotis briefed Abhisit, who was fully supportive, agreeing that there must be a political solution to the insurgency, or it would never end.

Keeping the movement on-board

¶7. (S) Vatikiotis did not think it likely that the insurgents would walk away from the negotiations, regardless of the political turmoil in Bangkok, because they had a strong stake in the continuation of the dialogue. He said there was no unity among the insurgent leaders, and they were not well organized. The movement was not on its last legs, however. The dialogue had benefited the movement by helping the insurgents consolidate - they generally did not trust each other, but now they were coming together more. They were becoming more engaged in the talks, with greater involvement from both religious leaders and "field commanders."

¶8. (S) Vatikiotis said he was trying to find ways to work around the vacuum in political leadership that was plaguing the process. He was currently focused on exploring a "track two process" to bring a wider circle of people into a broad discourse on the range of political issues that affect the South. He said the goal would be to build support among this wider group of stakeholders for a political settlement. HDC would stay out of this separate track; Vatikiotis mentioned a possible Norwegian interlocutor to move it forward.

¶9. (S) According to Vatikiotis, the insurgents taking part in the process would settle for some type of special autonomy. He said the problem with this was figuring out how to allow for this kind of special political status under the Thai constitution. He said that an academic working on this problem believed that the closest thing to a special

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political status they could hope for under the current constitution would be the establishment of a separate Ministry for southern Thailand, with a "Southern Minister" drawn from the group of elected southern MPs. While this idea had merit, Vatikiotis stressed it would not meet one of the basic demands for autonomy - an elected governor.

The fight drags on

¶10. (S) Regarding the situation on the ground in the south, Vatikiotis said the movement's leaders told him that the army's security grid had become tighter and more efficient. He did not believe, however, that insurgent capabilities had been significantly degraded. He said the leaders of the insurgency told him that they had changed their tactics in response to the army's changes; they were staging fewer attacks, but more confrontational and with a higher impact. Vatikiotis admitted that the RKK "phenomena" was something participants in the last round of meetings in the dialogue process were trying to come to grips with. Without being more specific, he said the insurgent leadership could not control all the RKK cells. (Note: The RKK, or Runda Kumpulan Kecil, is a name the RTG has given to commando-like cells associated with insurgent groups. The command and control of RKK cells remains unclear. End note.)

A role for outsiders: education

¶11. (S) Vatikiotis said there may be a role for outsiders in the conflict; he believed the RTG had become more open to overtures of help. He said there was a clear need for assistance on the educational front; he was often asked by southern Thai Malay Muslims if there were a way to break the cycle in education that too often forced kids from the south

to attend school in Middle Eastern countries because funding from Islamic foundations was the only money available to them. They receive degrees in religious studies, and then return to the South to take low paying jobs like taxi drivers and laborers. Vatikiotis said he did not have the impression this kind of education had led to involvement with extremists, but it did lead to a dead-end. Malay Muslims wanted their children to be professionals -- doctors, lawyers, etc., but had been forced to adopt limited horizons because of limited educational opportunities. He believed students would jump at the chance to learn English and gain access to a different educational system.

JOHN